

## Women and Narrative Structure in *Eyrbyggja Saga*

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*Eyrbyggja saga*, one of the most prominent if not one of the truly great Icelandic family sagas, has puzzled, delighted, and chagrined saga scholars and casual readers alike with its archaic and supernatural elements and episodic plot structure. In a sense, it has also functioned as a weather vane, with the approaches scholars have taken to it saying as much about the times in which the studies were undertaken as they say about the saga. Thus, in an era of growing respect for and interest in native genres (as opposed to the imposition of *etic*, analytic genres), Icelandic saga scholars have changed their approach to *Eyrbyggja saga* from one which assumes that the part of the saga that would make it comprehensible under their scheme must be missing, to one which looks within the saga as we have it for the thematic and structural elements that would have rendered it meaningful for its author and intended audience. This article will discuss my preliminary attempts to read *Eyrbyggja saga* in this way, while at the same time maintaining an awareness of my own particular position in history. Specifically, I wish to suggest that new understandings of the saga structure may be derived from focusing on the activities and influences of a number of its supernaturally powerful female characters.

Concurrent with the increased interest in native genres has been the development of women's studies and feminist approaches to literature, anthropology, and history, which have been attempting to rectify the *male focus* implicit in theories of human society—a focus which is a product of the scholar's own cultural preconceptions and often reinforced by the social situation in which she or he works. Interestingly, women in the Icelandic sagas have long attracted the attention of saga scholars. Although the sagas (and the world they depict) seem to be dominated by men and by a masculine heroic ethos, they also contain a number of women whose words and deeds would

be hard not to notice. Yet the tendency has been to see women in a purely supporting role and to consider them only insofar as they help to illuminate the men and move them toward violent conflict. In one of the most influential works on the subject of women in the sagas, Rolf Heller examines a number of types of female characters and concludes that the female characters are not the goal of the author's portrayal, but stand in an ancillary function to the portrayal of "männlichen Heldentums" (manly heroism) (1958:151), most often quietly dropping out of sight when this purpose has been served.

Recently, however, writers have suggested alternative views of the sagas' female characters. Carol Clover has looked at the role of women as inciters to revenge, a role Heller termed *die Hetzerin* and characterized as "die auffallendste Erscheinungsform der Frau in den Sagas" (the most striking form in which women appear in the sagas) (1958:98). Whereas Heller sees the *Hetzerin* merely as a way of moving the men into heroic conflict, Clover compares the Icelandic situation to funeral lamentations in other "societies governed by the law of bloodfeud" (1986:169) to suggest that women's incitement was part of a legal and ritual complex, and that "women's words" were perceived as "the equivalent of men's deeds" (1986:145). The combined impact of the trend toward analyzing the saga as we have it, and the growth of interest in feminist interpretation, has resulted in increasing numbers of scholars taking Clover's advice: "Critics who have found the plot diffuse and heroless would do well to look to the other gender" (1985:257).

Two scholars have recently examined two sagas which are often considered to be somewhat anomalous structurally, and have suggested they fit a pattern which has been termed "woman's biography." Helga Kress and Patricia Conroy have convincingly demonstrated that two sagas, *Laxdaela saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða*, respectively (two sagas which resist interpretation along the lines of feud patterns and male heroism),<sup>1</sup> should be seen as women's biographies. Conroy suggests that "these two authors have structured their sagas from the first chapter to the last as stories told about a woman and her husbands" and have both followed a common structure to tell this story (1980: 117).

*Eyrbyggja saga* is not a woman's biography in this sense. Nonetheless, much can be understood about the saga by following the major female characters in the story and the ways in which they affect surrounding events. *Eyrbyggja saga* can, I believe, be seen as a story about conceptions of changing roles, power, and responsibilities of men and women as Iceland changed from a Viking, bloodfeud society to a

settled, agricultural and pastoral society, from a pagan to a Christian belief system. Far from being ancillary or peripheral to the main action of the saga, women are at the heart of some central political shifts taking place in the saga, and the nature of their power and lack thereof is explicitly considered throughout the saga. I examine the most striking way in which the women of *Eyrbyggja saga* wielded power: through witchcraft. First, I will briefly describe the saga and what a number of scholars have had to say about it.

*Eyrbyggja saga*, like most family sagas, follows a number of families out of Norway in the late 800s and traces their development through the conversion of Iceland in 1000, and beyond. Unlike most family sagas, there is no clear hero or single most prominent family in *Eyrbyggja*; instead, the saga most closely follows a number of families: that of Snorri Godi, that of Arnkel, that of the brothers Vermund and Styr Thorgrimsson, and later those of the Thorbrandssons and the Thorlakssons, with a number of other important characters as well. These families are caught in an intricate system of loyalties, obligations, and conflicts, intermarriages and inherited hostilities, making it extremely difficult to sort out just who is to take what side in which conflict, for the characters as well as for the reader. Two moments in the saga illustrate this complexity. In chapter 44 a battle has broken out between the Thorbrandssons and the Thorlakssons. Styr Thorgrimsson, related to both groups, begins the fight on one side and ends it on the other, taking a life on each side. In chapter 46, in the aftermath of another battle, Thorgerd, sister to the Thorbrandssons and married to one of the Thorlakssons, refuses to go to bed with her husband until one of the warriors (her brother-in-law) dies, thus evening out the losses on each side. With its complexity, shifting loyalties, and episodic nature, it is difficult to present a plot summary or spell out what the saga is *about*.

This complexity has long puzzled saga scholars. In particular, the way in which Snorri Godi, one of the most influential figures in Icelandic history, comes in and out of the saga, has provoked confusion and consternation among readers who would like to make the saga a biography of Snorri but cannot.<sup>2</sup> While missing leaves and redactors' additions are always a possibility in medieval literature (and many scholars are trained to investigate the manuscripts in great detail for this possibility), in the absence of overwhelming evidence to this effect, it seems most fruitful to attempt to make sense of the saga as we have it. Thus, in 1959, Lee Hollander revised his earlier assessment of the saga as lacking a "continuous, absorbing narrative" and "built up of loosely connected episodes" (1959a:xiv), and determined,

instead, that the saga is an intricately braided series of sequences which shows "conscious planning on the part of an author who has in mind an audience . . . able to follow this method of presentation" (1959b:227). MacCreesh, while finding Hollander's explanation "far-fetched," sees the saga as a "saga of conversion" which arranges the action to balance out pagan stories with their Christian counterparts (1978-79:272-3). In this view, the supernatural elements of the saga, rather than being ugly interpolations or even strictly for entertainment (as others have argued), are an integral part of the saga's message, showing how Christianity has changed the ways in which events are to be interpreted and valued. McTurk (1986), arguing that given its placement in the saga, conversion cannot be considered central either thematically or structurally, proposes a structure based on the saga verses as well as on conversion and the supernatural. Pálsson and Edwards see the saga as encompassing two dimensions of interrelations of families and individuals—linear movement through time and social movement through marriage, possession of land, and so on. They further break the saga down into eight sections (1973:13).

The above writers all provide very useful readings of *Eyrbyggja saga* which have informed my own to a great extent. In particular, MacCreesh seems to be following Burke's lead in seeing sagas as "answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose" (Burke 1941:1). Many writers have commented on the intense antiquarian interest of the *Eyrbyggja* author (e.g., Hollander 1959a: xiii; Pálsson and Edwards 1973:25); Pálsson and Edwards add that the saga "describes a community progressing from lawlessness to collective responsibility" (1973:12). Since most date the saga's writing to the Sturlung Age, a time in which violence and social strife was to lead to Iceland's losing her independence,<sup>3</sup> it would seem reasonable for the saga's author to be fascinated by questions of the appropriate limitations to heroic individualism and communal responsibility, to have both a nostalgia for the heroic past and a concern for the implications of behaving like a Viking within a settled society. This is not a particularly radical concept in saga scholarship. What I am proposing is that the same ambivalent nostalgia held for the Viking ancestors might also be held for the Viking-age women, in particular those pagan women wielding supernatural power. It is to these, the witches of *Eyrbyggja saga*, I now turn.

Specifically, I am focusing on four women, who fall into a distinctive pattern of antagonistic pairs, the first pair occurring early in the saga, the second pair coming near the end, in the same year in which Christianity was adopted as the official religion of Iceland (the

year 1000). I see these two rivalries as essential to the structure of the saga, and I believe their different outcomes suggest social changes that the saga author perceived. On either end of these two sets of women are two other women, the first being one of the early settlers of the island, whom I will discuss first. The final woman is an old, blind woman whose prophecies are ignored with tragic consequences.

The first of these women to whom we are introduced is Geirrid, who came out to Iceland early in the settlement period, unencumbered by husband and family. She was previously married and had a grown son who would join her some years later. Geirrid's brother Geirroð had already settled at Eyr and granted his sister land across the fjord from him. She had her hall built across the road so that all travelers had to ride through it, and there was always a table with food on it for anyone who wanted it. For this she was considered a "*gøfugkvendi*," a noble woman (*Islenzk fornrit*:13). We are not told much about Geirrid, but this is an image meant to stay with the reader. In a harsh climate and an age of travel by foot or pony, hospitality was of extreme importance and a major way to display honor and social competence, as Bauman suggests (1986:142). It was, in particular, a quintessential act of female honor, since women were responsible for the household stores and for producing them for family and guests. In many places in the sagas, what and how a woman chooses to feed those at her table is used to convey important information about her and about her attitude toward her guests. To cite only three of many examples of this, the villainous Hallgerð, in a portentous moment in *Njals saga*, serves her husband stolen food; Thurid of *Heidarviga saga* carefully selects the menu for her sons' dinner to incite them to avenge their brother; and Thordis, Gisli's sister (*Eyrbyggja* and *Gisla saga*) serves porridge (a lowly fare) to her brother's killer. For Geirrid to maintain a table of food constantly available to all who pass through is no mean feat in a land where famine was common. Thus while the reader sees Geirrid as a generous, and as the saga says, noble woman, there is also an element of the supernatural here.

This suspicion is confirmed in Geirrid's descendants. Geirrid's son Thorolf Twist-foot is said to be a great viking and a difficult man. Thorolf has three children, two of whom, Arnkell and Geirrid, figure prominently in the saga. Arnkell proves to be a "big strong fellow, clever at law, and very shrewd," the foremost of his peers "both in popularity and strength of character" (Pálsson and Edwards: 52). He becomes a *godí* (a political, and in pre-Christian times, religious leader). His sister Geirrid is *margkunnig*, knowledgeable or skilled in magic (IF:29).

When this second Geirrid comes into the story she is living with her grown son, a man named Thorarin the Black. A young man named Gunnlaug, the son of Thorbjorn the Stout, often comes to Geirrid to study witchcraft with her. He is *námgiarn*, eager to learn, and spends a great deal of time with her, also going on occasion to talk with Katla, a widow with a grown son named Odd who often accompanies Gunnlaug. Katla is jealous of Gunnlaug's attention to Geirrid and accuses him of having sexual relations with her. On one occasion after having been warned by both Katla and Geirrid, Gunnlaug fails to come home when he is expected, and late in the night his father finds him outside the door, unconscious and badly scratched and cut. Odd spreads the rumor that Geirrid has hag-ridden Gunnlaug, and Thorbjorn the Stout summons Geirrid to court on this charge.

The legal case is the first of many conflicts between Arnkell and Snorri Godi. Arnkell supports his sister against Snorri, Thorbjorn's brother-in-law. The case against Geirrid is ultimately dismissed, a "great setback" to Snorri and Thorbjorn (P&E:61). When shortly after this confrontation Thorbjorn's horses turn up missing, he suspects Thorarin the Black, and goes in force to Thorarin's farm to charge him with stealing the horses. Thorarin, a peace-loving man, is slow to defend his honor, and his mother accuses him of being "more like a woman than a man." At this point Thorarin attacks and the battle is on. Thorarin's wife Aud moves in with other women to break up the fight by throwing clothes on the weapons, but in the process loses a hand. It might be suggested that this scene plays out a contrast between the older Viking-age woman and the younger settlement-age woman, with Geirrid concerned more about honor than peace, and Aud showing considerable bravery in attempting to keep the peace.<sup>4</sup> However, when Thorarin discovers his wife's injury, he takes out after Thorbjorn's retreating party and kills Thorbjorn, and in so doing repairs his image of questionable manhood. Geirrid learns that it was Odd who cut off Aud's hand, and Thorarin and Arnkell go to Katla's farm to find Odd. There follow several scenes in which Katla uses her sorcery to hide her son from the other two. Finally, Geirrid goes along to deal properly with Katla. She ties a sealskin bag over Katla's head (the correct way to subdue witches and prevent their using the evil eye) and directs the men to where Odd is hidden. Thorarin and Arnkell take Odd out and hang him, and as they do so Arnkell remarks that Odd owes his fate to his wicked mother. At this point Katla puts a curse on Arnkell, and this curse is to have a decisive effect on the course of his life and on his rivalry with Snorri Godi.

Katla promises Arnkell worse from his own father than Odd got from her, adding that she hopes before the end people will say that he has an evil father (IF:54).

After Katla makes this curse, Thorarin and Arnkell stone her to death. There is no one to protest or avenge these killings, and the saga leaves this story for ten chapters. When it picks up this storyline again in chapter 30 it makes no mention of the curse but notes that Thorolf Twist-foot is becoming more violent as he grows older. Always a hard man, Thorolf is now becoming downright strange, and his increasing animosity toward his son leads him to go to Snorri Godi to ask his support against Arnkell. Snorri is at first reluctant, but eventually agrees, with the end result that Arnkell is killed by Snorri's foster-brothers. The death scene itself is marked by a suggestion of bewitchery, as Arnkell sends his two servants home for help and they mysteriously forget their errand until it is too late to help him. Arnkell's death leaves no male kin to press a case against Snorri; his female heirs take up the case, and "consequently" it "was not followed as vigorously as people might have expected after the killing of so great a man" (P&E:125). As a result of this disappointing legal action "the leading men of Iceland make it law that neither a woman, nor a man under the age of sixteen, should ever again be allowed to raise a manslaughter action, and this has been the law ever since" (P&E:125).

In the meantime, Thorolf has died. This is far from the end of his involvement in the saga, however, for shortly after his death his ghost began to act up, haunting the farms in the valley in which he was buried until most of them were deserted. Arnkell (before his own death) had moved his father's body to a new grave, and for a brief time the ghost was quiet, but resumed its haunting after Arnkell's death. Nothing further is said about Thorolf until chapter 63, when he takes the form of a mysterious dapple grey bull which impregnates a cow owned by one of Snorri's foster-brothers, Thorodd. The cow bears a dapple grey bull calf that grows unusually fast. Thorodd's foster-mother, an old blind woman who is considered to have second sight, hears the bull calf and urges her son to kill it, saying it is not a natural calf, but a monster. Thorodd ridicules her for this talk, and in spite of her repeated warnings, he keeps the calf to fatten for slaughter; but before time for slaughtering in the fall, the bull kills him, thus avenging Arnkell. It then runs off and sinks into a swamp, and this is finally the end of Thorolf.

This is one of the major strands of *Eyrbyggja saga*; it relates importantly to Snorri's rise to prominence, since it removes his major rival, Arnkell. This is not, however, simply a story of how Snorri rose

to prominence. In terms of the amount of ink devoted to each, the story is as much about Arnkell and Thorolf as it is about Snorri; and Katla, although never mentioned again after her death, is strongly present all the way through the saga in the working out of her curse.

I will now turn to the second set of witches who figure prominently in the saga. Thorgrima Galdrakinn ("witch-face") is a weather-witch. Although we are introduced to her early in the saga, in the aftermath of the missing horses fight, she does not really figure until she is paid by Thorodd of Frodriver (not the same Thorodd as the one above) to make a blizzard which will keep his wife Thurid's lover from visiting her. The year that Christianity comes to Iceland, so does a woman named Thorgunna. She is, we are told, a Christian woman, in her fifties and very stout, strong, and vigorous. She comes to stay at Thorodd and Thurid's farm and falls for Kjartan, a boy of about 15 who rejects her advances. "It wasn't long," the narrative tells us, "before there was trouble" between Thorgrima Galdrakinn and Thorgunna. The saga does not tell us how this trouble arises, but the saga pairs this statement with the discussion of Thorgunna's attraction to Kjartan. The language which the saga uses to describe Thorgunna's feelings about Kjartan is "*Kjartan, sonr bónda, var þar svá manna, at Þórgunna vildi flest við eiga*" (Kjartan, the farmer's son, was the man that Thorgunna wanted most to deal with) (IF:139). One of the definitions of "*eiga við*" offered by Zoëga's *Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* gives the phrase an explicitly sexual meaning. Thus we see a parallel between this situation and Katla's accusations about Geirrid and Gunnlaug earlier in the book, except that Kjartan rejects Thorgunna's advances.

Thorgunna, however, is not long for the saga. While she is out working in the fields, a mysterious rain of blood falls from the sky. It dries immediately everywhere it falls except over Thorgunna. She falls ill and dies shortly thereafter, having first warned Thorodd that he must destroy her possessions after she dies, including her fine linen bedsheets and canopy. Thurid, however, had been enthralled with these things as soon as she laid eyes on them and will not let her husband destroy them. This begins a rash of hauntings, illness, and generally weird occurrences. Among those who die from these happenings are Thorodd and Thorgrima Galdrakinn. Finally, as Thurid is rapidly declining from the mysterious illness, Kjartan takes action to bring the strangeness to an end, destroying Thorgunna's belongings and banishing the ghosts.

We are not told that Thorgrima brought about Thorgunna's demise, but it seems fairly clear. Since we already know that she has



the power to change weather, the blood-rain seems to have her signature on it. Although we are not told whether Thorgrima has a sexual interest in Kjartan, the rivalry seems to be centered on him, and I suspect that Thorgrima is acting to protect Thorodd's interests. In addition, it is likely she feels threatened by having another powerful woman living so close to her. At any rate, the rivalry between Thorgunna and Thorgrima provides an echo of that between Katla and Geirrid but with some important differences. Whereas Geirrid and Katla were closely tied into a social conflict with important political ramifications, the latter two are not. The aftermath of their conflict is scattershot, random misery. Katla's curse had been followed out with a nearly surgical precision. Thorgunna leaves a legacy similar to Katla's curse in her interdiction violated. But the ramifications of this interdiction hurt many more people than the one who violates it, and, in fact, this individual herself recovers once the possessions are burned. No important changes in the power structure take place because of Thorgrima and Thorgunna. Like the old woman with second sight in the episode with the bull, it would seem that the ability of women's supernatural power to make a real social difference has vanished in the age of Christian, settled farmers. These women have become an anachronism. Women's witchcraft fit well into the pattern of society governed by plunder and bloodfeud. But society is now governed by law, and as we saw in the aftermath of Arnkell's death, women are shut out of this avenue for power.

It remains to say something about sexual power and supernatural power, because they are quite clearly linked in these women. Beginning with the first Geirrid, whose hall laden with food stretched across the road has both sexual and maternal resonances, this theme is developed explicitly in the powerful sexual desire which Katla, Geirrid, and Thorgunna hold for much younger men. All of these women are unattached, their children are grown, and they are still sufficiently young and vigorous to be very interested in young men. They are thus perfect examples of what Hoch-Smith and Spring refer to as "chaotic female sexuality" (1978:2-7). In stoning Katla to death, Arnkell and Thorarin may be seen as destroying this threatening expression of female sexuality. It should be remembered, however, that they are on the side opposed to the young man on whom her interest was focused. When Geirrid was accused of the same sort of thing, she was staunchly defended by her family and ultimately prevailed. It would appear, then, that there is not a simple relationship of female sexuality to evil at work here, nor are these women part of the "lineage of female seducers, one dimensional

women who bring about the downfall of men" (Hoch-Smith and Spring 1978:3). For the family in which Katla attempted seduction is the one that ultimately gains prominence partly as a consequence of her action.

The ambivalent nostalgia of *Eyrbyggja saga*, then, is extended to the actions of the founding women of Iceland as much as it is to the founding men. These are women in many of whom the saga author found much to admire, as the characterization of both Geirrids would indicate. Yet, the saga seems to say, things have changed; and the activities of supernaturally powerful women, like individualistic Vikings, are no longer fitting. At the same time, the saga author seems to mourn the loss of respect given to these women and their powers, for it is the failure to pay heed to the prophesies of Thorgunna and Thorodd's foster mother that is the immediate cause of the trouble in each of these cases. It is unclear how much the saga author knew about pagan society, and how much of the account is based on fantasy and speculation. However, *Eyrbyggja* should be seen as neither strictly a history nor simply an entertainment. Rather, it is a view of the past through the saga author's present, and an attempt to articulate issues of that present by manipulating an image of the past.

Recently, Jochens has considered the role of women in the sagas in her article, "The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?" (1986). She comes down on the side of the latter; strong women in the sagas are, in her view, male myths, constructed in part out of clerical propaganda aimed at requiring female consent in marriage, and in part out of the misogyny which was being promoted by the Church throughout Europe during this period. Strong, dangerous women who could wreak havoc if married off against their will would serve both of these ends. This argument is supported well by some of the women in some of the sagas and may help to explain particular cases. A weakness in Jochens' article, however, is demonstrated in the title and in her statement: "The final goal will be to determine whether the heroines should be taken at face value or whether they are irretrievably fictitious" (1986:37). In framing her argument in this way, Jochens leaves no room for the many intermediate ways in which women in the sagas may signify. The range of ways in which the women we have looked at in *Eyrbyggja saga* use their supernatural power, and the range of attitudes taken towards them by the other saga characters, suggests no such single form of propaganda was behind the saga's characterization of *margkunnig* women.

It is impossible to recapture the mental lives of people who died more than 700 years ago, and there is no way to escape the fact that

my reading of *Eyrbyggja saga* is that of a woman living in the late 20th century, of particular educational and political background. As Furman points out, "it is the reader's acumen, expectations, and unconsciousness which invest the text with meaning" (1980:49). It is for just this reason, however, that one must challenge the traditional readings of Icelandic sagas which have focused solely on male heroism and seen women's roles as limited to supporting this heroism. This article has attempted to present such a challenge to traditional readings of *Eyrbyggja*, by focusing on the influence of a number of female characters and suggesting that their roles play a major structuring role in the saga. To go further, I would tentatively suggest that the saga author saw women's power—in manipulating magic, language, and symbols—as a real force in pagan Iceland, and used the saga in part to explore what he or she saw as the changes wrought in women's power by the changing religious and economic patterns. This claim will require further study of the roles played by, and attitudes toward, the different forms of magic and sorcery in pagan Iceland, and the changes conversion made in these roles and attitudes.

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### Notes

- 1 For more on the concept of feud pattern as saga structure, see Byock (1982).
- 2 Sigfús Blondál, for instance, maintained that large portions of the saga were lost and the gaps were later filled with reference to other sagas; Eirík Magnússon argued that the author failed to finish his saga about Snorri, and a different ending was later added. (See Hollander's [1959b] summary of these scholars' approaches to the saga.) Gudbrand Vigfússon felt that *Eyrbyggja saga* was essentially a history which was polluted with ugly interpolations from the 13th century, as he characterized the episodes dealing with berserks, ghosts, and witchcraft. The "edited version" of the saga he dated to circa 1260; the saga itself, he maintained, was much older, and "stripped of the extraneous matter . . . its true character will be apparent to the reader" (1905:91).
- 3 Sveinsson (1953) is the greatest proponent of the concept of independent ages in Icelandic history and their influence on the literature. His depiction of the Sturlung Age as a sudden period of dramatic decline has not, however, gone unchallenged (see Byock 1985).
- 4 See T. M. Andersson (1970), who argues that the "displacement of the heroic ideal" was a recurrent and important theme in the sagas.

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